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'A fish out of water?' The therapeutic narratives of class change

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Abstract

Young people from working class backgrounds remained mostly excluded from the widening educational participation which characterised postwar Britain. Based on 20 semi-structured interviews which were part of a wider study about 'Social Participation and Identity' (2008–2009), this article explores the unusual learning trajectories of a group of working class adults born in 1958, who participated in higher education (HE) in a context where most people from the same socio-economic backgrounds did not. Drawing on Bourdieu's social theory, the findings suggest that different types of retrospective accounts were mobilised to reconcile working class habitus of origin and the perceived habitus as adults. Most research on working class and higher education focuses on the experiences of youth. By contrast, the use of retrospective accounts of adults has enabled the study to capture the implications that the educational trajectories have later in life. The authors consider these accounts a part of wider narratives that they define 'therapeutic'. Therapeutic narratives were employed to come to terms with the ambivalence produced by social mobility. Therefore, respondents were negotiating the sense of exclusion attached to class change, and the acknowledgement of the opportunities associated with a working class habitus accessing new social fields via education.

Keywords

Bourdieu, habitus, higher education, social field, social mobility, therapeutic narratives, working class

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Introduction

> … I got to university and that was the weirdest thing cause I mean I hadn't–, I was like a fish out of water, I mean I didn't have the social skills or the kind of family background or anything. (Man-9)

This article explores the shifting nature of working class identity in the context of changing educational opportunities and social mobility in Britain. It focuses on the experiences of a group of 'outliers': working class people born in 1958, who participated in higher education (HE) either directly after completing compulsory schooling during the 1970s, or through lifelong learning. The participation in higher education of this group was unusual compared to their peers from the same generation, who were unlikely to continue beyond compulsory education.

The changes that characterise postwar Britain affected the learning trajectories of those born in 1958 who lived across what Hobsbawm described as the 'Golden Age' of industrial expansion during the 1960s and 'the landslide' that starting from 1973 opened the 'Crisis Decades' (Hobsbawm, 2004). Between the 1950s and mid-1970s the British economy grew fast while the production began to shift from goods to services leading to occupational restructuring and a growing demand for high skilled jobs (Themelis, 2008). During these decades, British secondary education was characterised by a tripartite system (Secondary Moderns, Technical Schools and Grammar Schools), which was held responsible for 'the allocation of young people into labour market niches' (Vickerstaff, 2003: 271) and thus for reproducing class advantage or disadvantage. This is why the Robbins Report (1963), seeking to expand higher education, was initially perceived as a major drive for social mobility. The report relied on the noteworthy principle that university places 'should be available to all who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so' (Gibney, 2013). However, the ultimate outcomes of the report were disappointing and the educational expansion of the 1960s was not accompanied by any easing of access for working class students: 'Between 1961 and 1977 the participation rate for the middle classes rose from 19.5 per cent to 26.6 per cent, but that of the working class rose only from 3.2 per cent to 5.5 per cent' (Simon, 1991: 401). In the 1980s school leavers whose fathers were in professional occupations were still six times more likely to go to university than children in families with parents in manual and low skilled jobs (McCulloch, 2011). Evidence from the British cohort studies suggest that privileged young people with low academic ability have benefited most from the expansion of higher education, not the most able (Schoon, 2008). Even today, these trends have not changed as much as expected to the point that the effectiveness of education for social mobility in the UK has been put into question (Allen and Ainley, 2010; Brown et al., 2013). The relative importance of employment and 'careers' rather than increasing participation in education has been increasingly central in the debate about mobility in Britain, which is mostly perceived as the result of postwar occupational restructuring (Miles et al., 2011; Themelis, 2008).

The persistence of privilege and restricted access to higher education is reflected in Diane Reay's (2013) narrative about her own personal experience of being an academic originally from a working class background. Reay illustrates the challenges attached to social mobility via higher education and provides a starting point from which to explore

the implications of class change on identity. As she points out, dominant discourses about the role of education as a route for mobility need to be problematised further (Reay, 2013). Drawing on these considerations, this article contributes to the wider understanding of the mechanisms employed by individuals to make sense of their class change and shifting identity. It does so by using intergenerational lenses to highlight the combined role that socio-economic backgrounds, parental aspirations for their children and educational engagement have on class identity and habitus.

In the article, we draw on semi-structured interviews conducted with a sub-sample of the 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS) between 2008 and 2009 when cohort members were aged 50. This approach enables us to explore biographical narratives about the challenges of class change.

In the article, we first present the theoretical background relevant to contextualise the research, the methods and sampling procedures. We then focus on the main findings that emerge regarding motivations to participate in higher education, lifelong learning, gender dynamics and the hidden injuries of class change. We finally discuss the implications of continuing education for habitus and how they feed into therapeutic narratives of class change.

The therapeutic narratives of class change

Dominant discourses about social mobility tend to focus on the positive effects of education for class change considered to be a main life improvement. However, these positive effects are only one aspect of mobility and come together with some other challenges. The work of Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb (1973) during the early 1970s anticipated some of the enduring issues attached to class change. Sennett and Cobb argue that class change leads to 'hidden injuries' that have particular effects on intergenerational relations: the progress of working class children into a new class increases the distance from their parents, who become perceived as a burden and a source of embarrassment. In this sense, Sennett and Cobb have been mostly concerned with the 'hidden injuries' caused by different class cultures that socially mobile working class children have to negotiate. Drawing on the 'Social Participation and Identity' study Miles et al. (2011) found evidence of complex links between career identities and social mobility which involved preoccupations about the past, defensive accounts, sense of unease and fear of failure to live up to the initial expectations. Lehmann (2013) points out that the injuries involve the loss of social capital, which is not automatically replaced by new networks in the new class.

The 'hidden injuries' have continued to inform the analysis of social mobility, particularly in the context of the wider emotional implications such as the idea of 'habitus dislocation' (Baxter and Britton, 2001). Drawing on Bourdieu, Baxter and Britton (2011) argue that there are emotional implications to the habitus encounters with unfamiliar fields. As Reay at al. (2009a) point out the resulting disjunctures between habitus and fields 'can generate not only change and transformation, but also disquiet, ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty' (Reay et al., 2009a: 1105). Bourdieu defines habitus as 'the system of durable and transposable dispositions' (Bourdieu, 1990: 53–55). Dispositions are orientations, 'predisposed ways' or inclinations of acting in a certain way, which are

inside the individual but originate in the family during childhood. Dispositions are constantly negotiated in the social fields (Franceschelli and O'Brien, 2014), or the social space where habitus operates and is reproduced:

> To think in terms of field is to think relationally … in analytic terms a field may be defined as a network, or a configuration of objective relations between positions. (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 96–97)

Willis's (1977) famous ethnography of working class boys in the 1970s, *Learning to Labour*, highlights the tension between habitus and fields. The incongruence between the young lads' working class habitus and the educational field perceived as middle class, led to negative dispositions towards education and ultimately to the reproduction of the young boys' subordinate status.

Our understanding of the mechanisms underlying class change and its implications for identity also draws on Bourdieu's model of habitus and social field (Bourdieu, 1990). As detailed later, our respondents experienced a sense of difference and displacement deriving from the working class habitus accessing new social fields via the route of higher education. These feelings of inadequacy gave rise to retrospective accounts feeding into narratives which seek to reconnect with the past and make sense of life changes to create a new sense of identity (Phoenix, 2013).

In order to explore how respondents make sense of their class change and its implications for identity, we draw on Silva's (2012, 2013) idea of 'therapeutic narratives' employed in her work about the coming of age of working class young adults in the US. Silva's approach to therapeutic selfhood as 'reflexive and individually negotiated' draws on cultural theorists (Bellah et al., 1985; Illouz, 2008) and involves the idea of 'psychic healing' as a way to create a meaningful and coherent sense of self. Silva found that this type of selfhood is now also embraced by working class young adults and no longer a distinctive feature of professional middle classes. In this sense, Silva catches an apparent contradiction in the working class language, which is shifting away from the traditional collective emphasis towards self-oriented and individualistic discourses. This shift is the result of the wider influence of neoliberalism:

> In teaching young people that they alone can manage their emotions and heal their wounded psyches, the therapeutic ethos dovetails with neoliberal ideology in such a way to make powerless working class youth feel responsible for their own happiness. (Silva, 2013: 138)

While Silva emphasises the link between therapeutic and individualistic as overlapping narratives, we focus on the self-healing aspect of the therapeutic selfhood. Our data suggest that therapeutic narratives function as coping strategies by which respondents make sense and come to terms with changes in their class identity. By doing so, respondents evaluate their past and attempt to relieve themselves from the hidden injuries of their class change. The work of Reay et al. (2009a, 2009b) on working class students in an elite university, and Ingram's (2011) research about working class grammar school boys display well these complex identity negotiations. Lehmann's (2009, 2013) qualitative longitudinal study of working class university students in Canada depicts more positive

therapeutic narratives. In this last case, working class background was mobilised by students to promote a moral advantage characterised by a strong work ethic, sense of responsibility and by valuing real life experiences. This moral advantage was adopted to overcome the shortcomings of class differences.

Reconstructing a sense of agency: Therapeutic narratives of class change and aspirations

By providing individual justifications to the self-transformation produced in the social world, the therapeutic narratives of class change connect emotions to the social structure (Silva, 2013) and enhance the exploration of the subjective aspects of mobility. In many respects, this dynamism reflects the traditional sociological question of how agency is possible within the constraints set by the social structure. In Bourdieu's terms, the question of agency and structure embodies the problem of how habitus and fields are reciprocally informed.

We consider agency as 'bounded' (Evans, 2002) and therefore as a process which is temporally embedded in the lives of individuals through 'the incorporation of past experiences in the body' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 978). However, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that individuals are not simply pulled into routines but rather they are able to mobilise previous formative experiences to address present contingencies in line with what they perceive their current possibilities are. This future-oriented dimension of agency converges into aspirations, which reflect the sense of 'projectivity' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). As drivers of future attainment, aspirations incorporate the interplay between structural and individual conditions. Evidence suggests that young people from working class backgrounds who express high aspirations for the future are more likely to achieve a higher social status later in life than their less ambitious peers (Schoon, 2008) and are more likely to be returning to education after leaving school early (Schoon and Duckworth, 2010). However, Clair et al. (2013) found that even though the most disadvantaged young people are able to exercise agency and produce 'aspiration narratives', their achievements result from the resources attainable and the social contexts where these resources are mobilised. This is to say that aspirations are only partial drivers and that the achievement of successful educational and employment outcomes depends on negotiating a complex range of factors including access to material resources and cultural capital.

Miles et al. (2011) analysed the employment histories of cohort members in the 'Social Participation and Identity' study in order to shed light on their personal experiences of mobility. This article focuses on higher education and seeks to explore the drivers behind continuing education and its implications for class change. Nonetheless, differently from most of the current research on mobility and higher education, which has looked at the present lives of young people, our study has the advantage of exploring the changes in habitus across the time from childhood to adulthood. By focusing on adults aged 50 years old, it is possible to explore the implications of participating in higher education for identity and class change as reflected by biographical narratives. Therefore, this article addresses three main research questions:

1. What influenced and motivated 1958 NCDS cohort members from lower socio-economic backgrounds to participate in higher education?
2. What were their learning experiences according to their biographical narratives?
3. What were the implications of their educational journey on their class habitus and identity?

Methodology and sample

The article employs a qualitatively driven mixed method approach, which uses data from the NCDS datasets at age 16 and age 50, to stratify the selection of follow-up qualitative interviews conducted as part of a related project ('Social Participation and Identity'). NCDS is one of Britain's richest research resources for the study of human development, following the lives of all persons living in Great Britain who were born in a week in March 1958. 'Social Participation and Identity' is a qualitative follow-up study which draws on semi-structured interviews with NCDS cohort members born in 1958 ($N = 220$) conducted to 'investigate the association between individuals' social mobility experiences and the patterns of social participation' (Elliott et al., 2010: 3). Linking NCDS data collected at age 16 and age 50 to the interview data, we were able to identify 20 respondents from working class backgrounds who participated in higher education. Our selection included those who gained a degree as well as five working class respondents who completed A-levels. We first considered selecting only those with degrees, but after a preliminary analysis of the interview data we decided to adopt more of a purposeful sampling approach (Coyne, 1997) and included five extra cases of cohort members who achieved A-levels but did not complete higher education. These extra cases were important as examples of drop-outs and also provided accounts in relation to their experiences in grammar schools.

To identify the social class of origin of the cohort members, we used the parental occupational status as measured by the Register General's Social Classification using the age 16 NCDS dataset and we selected cohort members whose fathers were in skilled, semi- or unskilled manual labour, in agriculture or farming. We also considered the cohort members' employment at age 50. In addition, we have taken into account the aspirations that the parents of cohort members had for their children, enabling a wider conceptualisation of class beyond the most used occupational schemas (i.e. Goldthorpe, 2010).

The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). A combination of 'free' codes and other codes developed from our theoretical framework was applied using NVivo software. The themes were used to organise the data and identify specific narratives and meanings. These narratives were then explored and analysed in more depth.

The sub-sample

Analysis of the NCDS 1958 cohort datasets at age 16 and 50 suggests than only a small proportion of cohort members from lower socio-economic backgrounds had gained a degree level qualification by age 50: 11% of cohort members from working class backgrounds had got a degree by the time they turned 50 compared to 25% of those from

higher socio-economic backgrounds (whose fathers were in professional and managerial professional jobs).

Overall, 61 of the 220 cohort members interviewed for 'Social Participation and Identity' were from working class backgrounds: only 15 of them achieved a degree and another five achieved A-levels. Lifelong learning was important for this group and the majority (nine) of those who continued in HE did so as adults. Among those who did not go to university, two found work straight after the end of secondary school and one of them explained how he was discouraged to continue studying by his father; one male participant failed his science degree and then moved into full-time employment; two women got married straight after finishing secondary school and left education. We must note that parents of the selected cohort members had high educational aspirations and the majority of them wanted their children to continue after compulsory education up to university level. This was different from other working class members in 'Social Participation and Identity' who had low or no qualifications, whose parents expected them to leave school at minimum age. The 1958 NCDS cohort did not include many respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds (about 4%) because of the demographics at that time. Our sub-sample reflects this wider trend of the larger dataset and only one participant was non-white British from an Indian ethnic background. Table 1 provides a summary of the characteristics of our analytic sub-sample.

Motivations: Why did they continue into higher education?

The sociological problem about agency and structure provides the theoretical grounding to frame the question of why cohort members from working class backgrounds participated in higher education. The interview accounts suggest two main explanatory narratives: personal motivations to continue education and references to social factors and the structural dimension. The narratives about personal motivations to continue education varied from wanting a career to the need of fulfilment and the quest for independence:

> Well I thought, well you know, I just can't stay doing this because if you want any kind of future you've got to go and do something with your life, I would have been stuck in dead end jobs, so that's when I got to about mid-20s, I thought I've wasted enough time because I was looking back thinking, well it's like six years now since you've left school and you've not really progressed anything, so. (Man-2)

Interest in the subject and improving personal skills were also quoted as the reasons for wanting to continue education, as well as a more general 'passion for learning':

> I liked learning, I liked learning, hmmm, and I used to–, I used to go down to the library an awful lot, once a week generally and I'll take out books … and I would just sit and go through them and read about them and find out about them. And I enjoyed learning. (Woman-17)

The motivations to continue were often intertwined with the explanations of why some respondents left education early and went back to it later in life. A female respondent left school at 16 to contribute to the family finances, she then started a family and had two children before going back into education later in life:

Table 1. Characteristics of the selected working class cohort members.

Gender	Social class father (at 16 years old)	Social class mother (at 16 years old)	Parental expectations (at 16 years old)	Highest academic qualification at 50 years old
Male (1)	Foremen-manual	NA	Leave at min. age	Degree, PGCE, other degree level qual.
Male (2)	Semi-skld manual	Personal service	Uncertain	Degree, PGCE, other degree level qual.
Female (3)	Semi-skld manual	Inadequate info.	Leave at min. age	Degree, PGCE, other degree level qual.
Female (4)	Skilled manual	Semi-skld manual	Leave at min. age	2+ A-levels, Scottish Higher/6th
Male (5)	Foremen-manual	NA	Full-time education after 18	Degree, PGCE, other degree level qual.
Male (6)	Skilled manual	Unskilled manual	Full-time education after 18	2+ A-levels, Scottish Higher/6th
Female (7)	Skilled manual	Personal service	Full-time education to 18	Degree, PGCE, other degree level qual.
Male (8)	Skilled manual	Personal service	Full-time education after 18	Higher degree
Male (9)	Junior non-manual	NA	Full-time education after 18	Higher degree
Male (10)	Skilled manual	Personal service	Uncertain	Degree, PGCE, other degree level qual.
Male (11)	Work own account (manual)	NA	Full-time education to 18	2+ A-levels, Scottish Higher/6th
Male (12)	Work own account (manual)	NA	Full-time education after 18	Degree, PGCE, other degree level qual.
Female (13)	Skilled manual	Personal service	Full-time education to 18	Degree, PGCE, other degree level qual.
Female (14)	Skilled manual	NA	Full-time education after 18	Degree, PGCE, other degree level qual.
Female (15)	Unskilled manual	Unskilled manual	Leave at min. age	Degree, PGCE, other degree level qual.
Female (16)	Semi-skld manual	NA	Full-time education to 18	2+ A-levels, Scottish Higher/6th
Female (17)	Semi-skld manual	NA	Full-time education after 18	Higher degree
Male (18)	Semi-skld manual	NA	Full-time education after 18	2+ A-levels, Scottish Higher/6th
Female (19)	Unskilled manual	Personal service	Full-time education after 18	Degree, PGCE, other degree level qual.
Female (20)	Skilled manual	Skilled manual	Full-time education after 18	Degree, PGCE, other degree level qual.

> No, it was a financial thing, again because my parents had no money and I felt that I should go to work. … well I don't know if I would have gone to university, but certainly, hmmm, one of my teachers strongly tried to persuade me to go onto sixth form and do A-levels, which I didn't. I mean I went back to night school and did them later on. Hmmm, but no, at the time it was very much a conscious decision by me to bring some money in, hmmm. (Woman-4)

Other motivations focused on the role of social and structural conditions as affecting the learning trajectories. Family background but also parental expectations were described as the triggers of certain turning points in the educational journeys:

> I mean my parents didn't have much education but they always backed us up, you know … . They were very supportive of education, very, very much so. I think, well they kind of felt like they missed out. My parents were kind of very bright people of the generation that didn't have the same chances we did, you know, they had to leave school at 14 to look after their families. (Woman-15)

While Willis's ethnography of working class boys particularly emphasised the counter school culture as characterising working class values and aspirations, interviews with this small sub-sample of cohort members suggest an ambivalence. Some of the cohort members' parents had high educational aspirations for their children, who were encouraged to continue education after 18 years old:

> I've had a really wonderful childhood, wonderful parents, they didn't have two pennies to rub together. But education was important to them and they brought [up] four children … 'cause that was our goal wasn't it in those days, and … and I think we all achieved what they wanted us to achieve. So I think that's wonderful. (Woman-20)

Cohort members from families with higher educational aspirations demonstrated awareness of the differences in the intergenerational opportunities that were open to them compared to their parents:

> They [parents] were very supportive of education, very, very much so. I think–, well they kind of felt like they missed out, I mean my parents were–, my parents were kind of very bright people of the generation that didn't have the same chances we did, you know, they had to leave school at 14 to look after their families. (Woman-14)

In this sense parental encouragement to continue education incorporated the hope for social mobility. Nonetheless, parental aspirations were not the only way family background influenced the educational journeys of cohort members. The interview of another female participant shows how continuing education and schooling 'set her apart' from the rest of the family:

> I actually felt my parents were like deviants, you know, like I used to think I was adopted, or hoped I was, and that my sister [laughs]–, shouldn't laugh really, threw a brick, a plastic brick through the window and she said, 'you think you're dead posh with your voice and your skirt',

> [laughs] shouldn't laugh really. But–, and it was just the school, I felt like I'd found myself at this school, do you know what I mean? (Woman-15)

Similarly to Willis's idea that some aspects of working class culture tend to support a 'counter education' attitude, there were other families that were less supportive of their children's continuing education:

> So then we grew up and it was always–, you know, schooling was non-existent, we never got any homework help so I just bummed out of school, I just kind of can't be bothered. So I never did very well at school, so I'm not blaming them [parents], I'm just, that's the way we were working in a business and they were working hard to make money … . (Man-12)

One female respondent, who went into higher education later in life, explained how her father's emphasis on work was opposed to her aspirations about studying:

> Because he [father] would work an early shift, maybe six o'clock, and then to make the money up he'd work a late shift. So we'd be in bed by the time he got back home again. So there was that that was instilled, you know, you work, whatever happens, you work. (Woman-3)

The life histories of cohort members provide context to better understand these attitudes towards education. They show that the 'counter school culture' was not an inherent characteristic of low aspirational working class people, but rather the consequence of families lacking the cultural and economic capital required to navigate the education system and therefore to be able to support their children within it.

Other institutional factors influencing educational trajectories were described as contextual, or generational. During the 1970s free grants were available to university applicants and were regarded by respondents as triggers of social mobility:

> You know I was–, I was academically talented therefore I went to university on a full grant and I'm kind of now upwardly mobile, you know, I could've done anything and I've done lots of things I wanted to do. And, you know, it's based on having the academic ability to–, to do it but I was on a full grant at university. But politically I've paid it back haven't I, you know, it's–, and that–, actually thinking about it that's quite an important thing generationally, it's our generation that that happened to isn't it? (Woman-14)

Another respondent also highlighted how structural/institutional factors intertwined with emphasis on the role of free education on social mobility:

> Nobody can escape from their generation. Yes I do. A very fortunate generation because with regard to an education we were nearly the last to complete our formal education under the system as it was – where everybody had full grants. I didn't pay a penny for the education that I had. In a way, I came out of the colleges with money in the bank and I benefited money-wise from going to college. That's the generation that I feel a part of. The generation that succeeded to finish our education without large debts. And in my opinion, education should be free, without a doubt. (Man-8)

In sum, the narratives about 'motivations' suggest that continuing education resulted from the complex interplay between individual agency and structural conditions.

Therefore, personal motivations and preferences as 'dispositions' were negotiated within an institutional and generational context, which provided cohort members with both barriers and opportunities for social mobility.

Lifelong learning and gender dynamics

Decisions of working class cohort members to continue studying did not always follow linearly the end of compulsory education, but rather happened later in life as adults. Therefore, lifelong learning was a characterising element of the educational trajectories suggesting that, for almost half of the respondents, the step into higher education was easier as adults:

> When I was 18 … I really didn't know my own mind. I had no–, I had no focus, I had nothing in my mind that I really wanted to do and I just needed to grow up a little bit before I knew what I wanted out of life, and it worked out for the best for me, because I was much more prepared to work, I mean … I've always worked. (Woman-3)

The lifelong learning trajectories also reflect the influence of gender on respondents' personal biographies. Studies about participation in lifelong learning reveal women increasing participation and their variety of experiences (Benn et al., 1998; Leathwood and Francis, 2006). In this study, women tended to return to education after having started a family, after the children had grown up or after the failure of marriage:

> I hadn't realised until 26, that was because by that time I'd married, was spoilt terrible and didn't have to work, life was just handed to me on a plate, which didn't do me any good, really. Then I separated and divorced and then I realised that I wanted something out of life for myself, and I wanted to achieve it myself, which I did do … . That's when I really knuckled down to further educating myself, eking out a career for myself and being totally financially independent, and emotionally independent at that time, then. (Woman-3)

Women's accounts suggest ambivalence between their belief in their strong sense of agency, which involved the search for fulfilment and independence through learning, and the perception of gendered barriers:

> The one thing I regret in my 50 years is not going on to do my Master's after I'd done the degree, but I got pregnant on the degree and I had to fight to go back. After I had [daughter] I took a year out and then–, the guy of the course said, 'Well you've got a baby now and you won't be thinking straight and your brain will have been affected by you taking the time off.' (Woman-15)

> My dad was really staunchly motivated for my brother, more than, I would say, the girls, … it's just that it was more important for the man, because … he believed that the mother should stay at home when the children are born, the male had to make sure he had a good job in order to provide for the children when they came along. (Woman-3)

These narratives involve the idea of 'education as lifeline' and therefore as a way to reassert women's independence and agency. However, these claims about individual agency have to be reconciled with the influence of structural factors and the discontinuities in

most of the women's learning trajectories, which were gendered and marked by exclusion and disadvantage.

'Fish out of water'? Dealing with the hidden injuries of class change

In exploring cohort members' identity as learners and their experiences of higher education, the analysis is consistent with other research (i.e. Ingram, 2011; Lehmann, 2013; Reay et al., 2009a, 2009b), supporting the thesis that class change leads to certain 'hidden injuries'. What sort of 'hidden injuries' were cohort members experiencing? The 'fish out of water feelings' were strong among respondents, that is to say they had to face a strong sense of displacement attached to the working class habitus operating in the middle class field of higher education. A female respondent describes her alienation starting at school as reflected in her accounts about receiving 'Free School Meals', which she perceived as a stigma of her socio-economic status:

> A big thing at school for me was, we used to have free school dinners and I can always remember having–, at the beginning of every week we used to go–, being called up in the front of the class being given these discs which meant that we got free school dinners. Everybody else had to pay for them or whatever but if you were in a lower class group you were–, you were given the discs at the beginning of the week and everybody knew that your parents–, you were on benefits and so therefore you were getting free school dinners, you weren't paying for them. (Woman-7)

Other narratives about the injuries highlight a sense of difference between the new mobile self, the family and the community of origin:

> I think my schooling set me apart completely, or my access to education. I think my accent … set me apart. … My father turned up one time at the school as a gardener and I was mortified. … So in lots of ways I think I've mellowed over the years but I–, don't know if I was an intellectual slob–, slob [laughs], snob really. Whereas now I just feel I am a working class girl who had access to a brilliant education, you know. … I'm very privileged to have had a very good education at pass 11 Plus and I think that, you know, my school was a lifeline for me, I felt safe in school. It was when I went home I just couldn't, you know, it was the thought of going home that used to frighten me. (Woman-15)

This last passage shows how the respondent was dealing with the complexity of a habitus operating in the two fields of family and school. Her narrative develops around the idea of 'education as lifeline', suggesting the belief in the healing role of schooling able to create a more positive self.

The sense of 'not fitting in' also gave rise to other injuries, which involved lower levels of self-worth with some cohort members describing themselves as 'not the brightest' or not the 'cleverest' and finding learning quite difficult, with implications for their attainment. The account below reflects a cohort member's attempt to heal the 'hidden injuries' attached to an old low-confident self by reflecting on his shifting identity from past self-worthlessness to a renewed and strengthened self:

> I was never one of the brightest kids. Like, my brother he's an immensely intelligent man, I was never one of the brightest people but of course when you're young you don't realise that, when you're young you're just–, it is what it is. … I come to understand and maybe this is one of the key turning points with your life, is when you come to understand how you work, what makes you tick and that some people–, I always assumed it, someone was clever, they were better but of course that isn't the case. … It's what they do with it and how they get there and had I not had the self-awareness … that I've got now when I was younger and obviously not realising where in the pecking order of intelligence one lies, I always assumed that I had to understand how things work before I could do it … . I can now see that some people actually just pick things up more quickly … and some people can actually perform functions without understanding what it is that they're doing. (Man-11)

This passage resembles the previous respondent's personal story of healing and also suggests an underlying sense of resilience. There were also more positive narratives where respondents recounted their experiences in education in terms of enjoyment and success:

> I passed 11 Plus, went to grammar school, felt like I didn't fit in then because all the people that were at grammar school generally came from better backgrounds than I did, but, hmmm–, but I enjoyed it, I did enjoy it. (Woman-4)

Those who enjoyed learning spoke about 'being wise' and 'being clever', liking the social life attached to education, enjoying finding out about things and developing a genuine interest in the subject they studied:

> The schooling was good, it was excellent really when I look now and think about the quality of the education, it was excellent and some of the teachers were superb, it was just me, I just had an attitude I think … . There were lots of practical difficulties in the sense that it was a grammar school where people will pay and we had boarders as well so there were a lot of wealthy people in the school and we were like three poor children so to speak. (Woman-13)

The accounts about overcoming difficulties or celebrating achievements reflect the ambivalent nature of respondents' narratives, shifting between the concerns about not fitting in and the enthusiasm for the opportunities enhanced by education. Nonetheless, the analysis suggests that even the more positive narratives were stories of resilience where success resulted from the individuals' endurance in overcoming the injuries caused by their changing habitus.

Therapeutic narratives of class change: Making sense of a changing habitus

In the interviews respondents reflected on their class background and whether they believe it has changed throughout their lives. Class change was presented as emotionally demanding because it brought about a sense of uneasiness attached to reconciling middle class and working class experiences. In order to make sense of their 'injuries', respondents developed different therapeutic narratives telling the stories of their personal 'healing', intended as ways of coming to terms with the changing habitus.

But how were these therapeutic narratives employed to heal the hidden injuries of class change? In making sense of their life histories, some of the cohort members (just over a quarter) were seeking to '*keep a working class habitus*' and remained attached to their social status of origin. One female respondent, who got a degree and worked as a teacher, still described herself as working class:

> I would still like to think I'm working class. … Because, hmmm, whilst I was growing up with–, I probably–, when I–, if I was still teaching I probably would be classed as working–, as middle class wouldn't I? But I think my background and my deep roots are working class. (Woman-20)

Remaining working class involved a sense of loyalty and respect for the hard working parents:

> [I'm] working class. Even though I'm living [in] this big house. I tell the kids, 'You and your father are middle class, I'm working class.' [laughs] Yeah. I saw how hard my–, I saw how ordinary–, I see how ordinary people can struggle, and my dad worked hard all his life and I don't want to move away from that identity … . No, I'm working class, I mean I always will be. … I vote Labour, even if they are New Labour [laughs]. (Woman-13)

Therapeutic narratives about '*keeping a working class habitus*' prioritised the 'roots and origin' and reflected the emotional difficulties associated with moving to a higher social class. In some cases, attachment to the working class habitus involved alienation from middle class cultural elements:

> Definitely not upper class, because I couldn't stand their voice [laughs]. That's the one thing that really irritates me, that funny voice they manage to get. I think it must be trained into them at some school or another. It's a horrible voice, isn't it. (Man-1)

By contrast, other narratives were employed to heal from the injuries of the past by focusing on the benefits of '*moving to a middle class habitus*'. These narratives include accounts emerging from cohort members (just over a quarter of selected respondents) who emphasised their mobility as progress and life achievement while they looked at their class of origin as something they wanted to move away from. References to the material gains derived by the class change were defining elements of the narratives about becoming middle class:

> Well I do think it's changed from … yes, I mean, certainly my family are working class and I do feel now I'm middle class, yeah. Hmmm. Yeah.
>
> *I mean what makes you define the change in class then?*
>
> Hmmm, well it–, as well as material things, I've, you know, where you live in and owning your own house as opposed to renting your own house and–, hmmm, Mum and Dad never had any money, you know, there was never any money, it was always a struggle for them, but, hmmm, so it's just interests and the social circles that you move in and … (Woman-13)

In this context, educational and professional achievements were presented as the main routes to move away from the working class roots:

> I was born to the working class. My father worked as a lorry driver and mechanic and my mother helped in the kitchens at the primary school. Therefore I was working class. What I am now is middle class, with respect to any defining terms I am middle class and that doesn't worry me at all.
>
> *How would you define middle class?*
>
> Certainly having been educated to the level of degree or above. Working at a managerial level or higher or being self-employed. Working in the creative sector. Earning a reasonable income, comfortable. Things like that, I think. (Man-8)

The cultural shifts associated with mobility were also important for this second narrative. One female respondent appointed 'middle class ideals' as the factors behind class change important for her children's upbringing:

> Like my mum and dad I saw the typically working class how they treat kids and so I am in that I work for a living but I suppose, yeah, I do have middle class ideals in that I always encouraged the kids, I always tried to stimulate their minds, I always spent hours like trying to encourage [them] and then explain anything. (Woman-19)

The different attempts to take distance from the working class origin had consequences for finding a coherent sense of self.

Remaining working class and becoming middle class were the main therapeutic narratives of class change but there were also other strategies employed to make sense of the shifting habitus. The emerging idea of a '*classless habitus*' (just a quarter of the selected respondents) reflects how respondents came to terms with a sense of uncertainty about social class as identity:

> *Do you think of yourself as belonging to a social class?*
>
> No 'cause I don't really–, they don't exist, I don't recognise them, I think that's what it is and therefore I couldn't probably put myself in them, so no I don't. … I just–, I just feel that that kind of definition [class] is just an odd way of looking at people. (Woman-13)

Similarly, another respondent made sense of his identity by shifting attention away from social class, considered as an outdated idea unable to reflect the contemporary divisions in society:

> I don't think I belong to any particular class now, thought we'd got–, moved away from that type of thinking now. (Man-2)

A smaller group of respondents spoke about their class identity as oscillating between class of origin and class of destination. Having a '*cross-over habitus*' reflects the attempt to bring together working class roots and middle class current status while acknowledging both attachment and distance to the origin:

> I kind of saw myself as being a crossover between what used to be known as being working class and what used to be known as being middle class, back in the–, that kind of '50s type classification'. (Man-11)

Negotiating class of origin and class destination involved multiple senses of belonging:

> Yeah, so probably I'm linked with a social class, whether I see myself [intake of breath]–, I think, because of my roots I see myself as working class but I live in a very middle class area and associate with very middle class people. So, I think I vacillate. And sometimes upper class people [laughs]. So yes I do, but I don't see myself as being unable to shift. (Woman-3)

These different narratives reflect how the challenges and the opportunities of mobility take the form of the changes and adaptations of their habitus. In their attempts of coming to terms with the past, these narratives are therapeutic and act as explanatory tools mobilised to make sense of life changes and therefore employed as 'healing strategies'.

Conclusions

This article has explored the shifting nature of working class identity and contributed to thinking about the complexity attached to class change and social mobility. In so doing, we draw on the experiences of an unusual group of British working class adults, who participated in higher education at a time when the majority of people from the same socio-economic backgrounds did not.

In this specific context, Bourdieu's framework has been particularly helpful to provide a 'less taken for granted' understanding of social mobility, which takes into account the challenges of changing class identity as incorporated by the habitus moving into new social fields. As Miles et al. (2011) highlight, the 'subjective dimension of mobility' has remained obscured, hidden behind wider societal trends. By extending the idea of 'therapeutic narrative' to the analysis of class change, we sought to understand more about the individual experiences of mobility and particularly how respondents came to terms with the emotional consequences of a working class habitus accessing middle class fields via higher education.

Respondents' narratives touched on their motivations to continue education which had to be negotiated with the influences of social conditions such as family background or gender, in order to explain the continuity or discontinuity of the educational journeys. The findings suggest that different therapeutic narratives were employed as explanatory tools to make sense of the hidden injuries and the sense of displacement caused by class change. Most respondents sought to '*keep their working class habitus*' or to '*move to a middle class habitus*'. There were also narratives about a '*classless habitus*', not recognising class as an identity, and of a '*cross-over habitus*', which instead saw social origin and current status as sources of new and fluid identities. These four narratives suggest an underlying ambivalence about working class roots. Within this ambivalence, the narratives also reflect a general sense of resilience, which enabled respondents to overcome their disadvantaged start in life by drawing on the hard working ethic apprehended in the working class family. Within the debate about social mobility in Britain, these narratives suggest multiple ways in which class identity still matters.

Differently from Reay et al. (2009a, 2009b), Ingram (2011) and Lehmann (2013), who focus on the experiences of youth at one point in time, we have been able to capture the implications that educational trajectories have later in life. The focus on retrospective

accounts of adults has allowed the exploration of how individuals construct their biographies and identity. Do the 'hidden injuries' of mobility heal later in life? Our selected respondents reflect a mixed picture: there was a recognition of the achievements deriving from participating in higher education, perceptions of education as a 'lifeline', but none of the respondents had forgotten the challenges of their journeys. Importantly, the nature of these respondents, who were 'outliers', is by itself proof that the experiences of mobility discussed in the article were exceptional. Indeed, they happened in a context of 'class reproduction' where only a minority of working class cohort members successfully completed higher education.

Finally, our insights provide scope for future investigation to explore further how dominant discourses on the role of education as route for mobility can be problematised. As Reay (2013) points out, the focus on social mobility as the main way to tackle structural inequalities has policy implications and shifts attention away from other routes, including employment and redistribution policies.

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Résumé

La grande majorité des jeunes issus des milieux ouvriers a été exclue de la scolarisation massive qui a caractérisé la Grande-Bretagne de l'après-guerre. À partir de 20 entretiens semi-directifs réalisés en 2008-2009 dans le cadre d'une vaste étude sur « La participation sociale et l'identité », cet article examine les parcours d'apprentissage d'un groupe d'adultes de la classe ouvrière, né en 1958, qui a suivi un enseignement supérieur, contrairement à la majorité des personnes du même milieu socio-économique. En

s'appuyant sur la théorie sociale de Bourdieu, nos résultats mettent en évidence dans leurs récits rétrospectifs les tentatives de conciliation de l'habitus de leur origine ouvrière et de l'habitus de leur vie d'adulte. La majorité des recherches sur la participation de la classe ouvrière à l'enseignement supérieur traitent d'expériences vécues par des jeunes gens. L'utilisation de témoignages rétrospectifs nous permet d'appréhender les conséquences de ces parcours de formation sur la vie ultérieure de ces personnes. Nous envisageons ces témoignages dans un ensemble plus vaste de récits que nous appellerons « thérapeutiques ». Ces récits thérapeutiques permettent aux acteurs d'accepter le conflit entre un sentiment d'exclusion et la reconnaissance des opportunités offertes par le passage d'un habitus ouvrier aux nouveaux espaces sociaux par le biais de l'éducation.

Mots-clés

Habitus, enseignement supérieur, mobilité sociale, récits thérapeutiques, classe ouvrière

Resumen

Los jóvenes con antecedentes de clase trabajadora permanecieron mayoritariamente excluidos de la participación en la ampliación de la educación que caracteriza la Gran Bretaña de posguerra. Basado en 20 entrevistas semiestructuradas, parte de un estudio más amplio sobre "Participación Social e Identidad"(2008-2009), este artículo explora las trayectorias de aprendizaje inusuales de un grupo de adultos de clase trabajadora nacidos en 1958, que participó en la educación superior (ES) en un contexto donde la mayoría de la gente de los mismos estratos socioeconómicos no lo hicieron. A partir de la teoría social de Bourdieu, los resultados sugieren que se movilizaron diferentes tipos de narrativas retrospectivas para conciliar el habitus de clase trabajadora de origen y el habitus percibida como adultos. La mayor parte de las investigaciones sobre clase trabajadora y educación superior se centra en las experiencias de la juventud. Por el contrario, el uso de relatos retrospectivos de adultos nos ha permitido captar las implicaciones que las trayectorias educativas tienen en el futuro. Consideramos que dichos relatos son parte de las narrativas más amplias que definimos "terapéuticas". Se emplearon narrativas terapéuticas para resolver la ambivalencia entre un sentimiento de exclusión y el reconocimiento de las oportunidades asociadas a un habitus de clase trabajadora accediendo a nuevos campos sociales a través de la educación.

Palabras clave

Habitus, educación superior, movilidad social, narrativas terapéuticas, clase trabajadora